DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 855 CS 212 623

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TITLE Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (Tampa, FL, November 15-17, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Creative Writing; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Literary Genres; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Attitudes; Writing Research; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Personal Writing; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Writing instructors and students alike need to cross the line between composition and creative writing far more often than they do. As students indicate in their essays, composition is often viewed as an unpleasant task, while creative writing is perceived as more enjoyable. Among teachers, creative writing instructors are phobic of critical theory and writing research, while many freshman composition instructors are not comfortable, self-analytic writers. The institution of English studies has always valued the consumption of texts (interpretation and reading) over the production of texts (writing). Creative writing as a composition research area is generally ignored, and educators tend to deny the commonalities of writing a poem and writing an essay. It may be time to take another look at the distinctions between writing genres, as these distinctions may be simplistically exclusionary. Furthermore, questions need to be asked about creative writing instruction. Among these are: why the history of creative writing is the last to be written; why critical theory and writing research are devalued; and why there is a perception that the academy taints the creative writer. (Six endnotes are included; 23 references are attached.) (SG)

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Florida State University
Paper presented at the 1990 CEA breakfast,
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Crossing the Lines:

On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing

Here is a student journal entry, discussing creative writing and composition:

> I'm really confused here. What's the difference between the two? Most of the time I use the two words interchangeably because I'm not into the minute details and specific jargon that the English majors are. For all I know, it is a grave sin to use one for the other.
>
> If I think really hard, I can see a line of distinction begin to form between the two ideas. Is creative writing stuff that is done for fun, and composition stuff that the teacher makes you do? That's what it meant in elementary school, and later. Composition was writing about a specific topic, picked out by the teacher and had to be a certain length and certain form. Creative writing was anything you felt like putting down on paper. My creative writing was most often poetry, or a short story. Composition was an essay. So it's fun stuff vs required stuff. Then I wrote a paper that was required, and it turned out to be fun. What??!? Yes, and it was an English (ugh! don't say it!) term paper. I chose my own topic, so I wouldn't get bored with it. Something totally off the wall, so fascinating that it's appeal overwhelmed my intense hatred of term papers. It was on parapsychology.

This student, I'll call her Fran, found composition a dreary,

12623

teacher-imposed task and creative writing something done to pass time, for fun. In her worldview, students in creative writing classes seemed launched on a teacher-less field-trip and students in composition classes entered a kind of academic prison. Fran was confused even as this line formed when she realized that the distinction between fun stuff and required stuff, creative writing and composition, broke down when she chose and wrote on her own topic, parapsychology. Equally important, from the view of the two writing professions, Fran doesn't make nearly enough of the genre distinction that her teachers make--that is, that creative writing is poetry and stories, non-non-fiction, while composition is essays, non-fiction. Finally, there's a hint of guilt in Fran's story; she had fun and even learned in a composition class only when she broke the rules.[1]

Here is a second story. A first year college freshman calls home to tell her mother, a friend of mine who was for many years closely connected with Freshman English, about the student's own Freshman English class. Writing Paper #1, the daughter, whom I'll call Lee, was turned off. She didn't like the teacher, the assignment, or the grade she recieved--a C. She reported current freshman lore that claimed your first paper grade was your end-of-semester class grade; start at C you'll end at C.

Paper #2--Lee calls home and tells her mother the class is the pits. Students are asked to go off campus and interview someone about their work and writing. Lee doesn't have time, doesn't want to, knows she's going to get a C.

A week later, Lee calls home to tell her mother that she's

received a B- on Paper #2 and strong teacher encouragement. She tells her mother she's excited. Then, she explains to her mother that she invented the interview.

Only now Lee's teacher wants to conference. What should she do?

Paper #3--Lee makes a high B. She likes Freshman English. Oh yeah, she enjoyed the conference on paper two, even. The only tough moment came when the teacher asked her about a detail relating to her imagined "real" interviewee. "I'll go back and ask him," Lee assures her composition teacher.

Freshman English for Lee was also the place where writing was no fun, at least until she redefined her assignment by turning in a piece of "imaginative" writing for the required factual interview. Lee too is not at all bothered by the genre distinctions teachers rely on; genres seem to have little to do with her growing success with writing.

Last, a story from the creative writing side of the line. In spite of Fran's assumption that creative writing is the fun stuff, students who enroll in creative writing classes for the first time often have to overcome an overwhelming sense of unworthiness. Since creative writing is usually an elective class, those who elect it may be English majors, more steeped than fellow students in the traditional canon.[2]

If creative writing is the class in which literature is made, as the English-studies-influenced-freshman tends to think, she or he will wonder: Am I good enough to make literature with a capital L?

A student, I'll call him Frank, writes in his journal:

> I think I was misleading myself for a very long time. I had

so many grand ideas about writing that I had forgotten that you have to write to be a writer. I had set so many preconceived notions in my head; grand notions, that I never could of expected to live up to them all.

I have learned if nothing else to rationalize my writing. Instead of pondering over ideas and waiting for the perfect one, the one to make me famous, I take small ideas and make them good ones. I capture the feelings I have on paper or my word processor. I just recently finished a short story that I am very proud of. It was 8 pages long, the longest one I had ever written. It had scenes, summaries, dialogue...I love it. I didn't really ever think I had it in me. I was putting so much pressure on myself to write the masterpiece that all of my writing was overdramatic, didn't say anything and was shallow. I have learned to write in stride, write for myself & let my ideas flow. Although I really do picture my audience as I write, I now write with much less apprehension and try not to make them my cornerstone.

I have realized that just by sitting down and writing many different ideas just pop into your head. It is as if you turn on a hose that has been lying out in the sun. You expect cold water to come out & then are amazed that you get scalded by the water that has been heating in it's length.

For some of us a ready response to Frank's entry is to shake our head and think he's more than a little misguided. Famous? A masterpiece? For, depending on your feelings about who should be

encouraged to pursue "creative" writing, you may find Frank's hose metaphor an indication of talent and original thinking or a prediction of mediocrity.

I believe the lines of distinction that we and our students draw and redraw and which dissolve so readily, are, mostly, counterproductive, and this essay argues that we need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing far more often than we do. I will be describing what it has felt like to enter the creative writing classroom as a compositionist and the world of composition studies as a writer. Essentially, simple but insistent questions have plagued me over the years I've spent in the confusing no-person's land between academically sanctioned non-fiction and non-non-fiction (terms I choose intentionally to make the distinctions as problematic as they really are).

I'll start with me, entering classrooms. I was trained to teach composition. I was not trained to teach poetry. However, I write poetry and not compositions (at least not the type of essays--the modes--that I was at first trained to teach my students). Jim Corder is one of the few composition teachers I know of who regularly takes on this challenge.[3] In fact, like many of the new teachers of writing that I, myself, train now, I never took freshman English, having tested out of those classes and wandered back into the fold via literature and creative writing.

While it is a problem in creative writing that many of its practitioner-teachers are critical-theory and writing-research phobic, it is also a problem for freshman composition that many of its teachers are not comfortable, self-analytic writers. Graduate

students in creative writing programs inevitably see themselves as writers while M.A. and Ph.D. candidates in English literature traditionally have prepared themselves for lives as "scholars," defined by their abilities to read. Harvey Kail claims that an undergraduate's career as a student of great literature may ill-prepare that potential M.A. or Ph.D. candidate from seeing herself as a writer (even if she writes professionally) because, "The problem for many of us is that authors became our heroes long before we began to think of ourselves as writers willing to compete with those heroes for a reader's attention" (89). Kail claims this may be true even for those now engaging in composition studies.

Clearly, teachers who don't know about, like, or value writing as a subject may be perpetuating the conservative composition class Fran mentioned, one where students write only on teacher-specified topics of restrictive length and form: no fun. Equally, graduate students with an unhealthy sense of author hero-worship may transmit those feelings to a creative writing student like Frank who saw writing primarily as the act of producing a masterpiece in order to gain fame.

We need remedies. One has been offered with great force by Robert Scholes in Textual Power. Scholes describes how the institution of English studies has always valued the consumption of texts (interpretation and reading) over the production of texts (all writing) and that in the four-tiered textual hierarchy of the traditional English department, creative writing ranks as pseudo-literature (literature in the wings) and is valued over composition (pseudo-non-literature). Both, in turn, are subservient

to literature because literature calls for interpretation, the highest ranked form of consumption. Scholes says:

> We feel that interpretation is a higher skill than reading, and we value and tend to privilege texts that require and reward interpretive activity. This is, in fact, one way of defining literature, and it is one reason for preferring fictional texts to thematic texts, stories to essays.
>
> From the point of view of interpretation, stories are better than essays because essays "say what they mean" and stories do not, leaving that job for the interpreter. There is much that can be questioned in this view, but for the moment we must be content to note its ubiquity. (22)

In spite of these apparently stable, ranked positions, creative writing developed <u>with</u> composition. Doug Meyer claims:

> English composition prepared the way for creative writing, not in accepting poems and stories, but in establishing that literature could be used for other purposes than philological research. (57)

The two writings were in unison at the turn of the century after which, according to Meyers, composition became a routinized operation for teaching the masses to write.[4] Robert Connors traces a more efficient institution-serving movement, claiming "Narration and description seceded to become the nuclei of creative writing courses, and argumentation, finding itself more of an orphan in English Departments, took refuge in Speech departments and became largely an oral concern for many years" (30). From a creative writing historian or composition historian's point of view, composition was left with the stripped down expository, non-fiction, essay form that we now

recognize, while literary composition was viewed generally as unsuitable for "the masses:"

> The new critics of English composition were not opposed to the notion of a genuine literary education. They simply believed that, as a course for all students, English composition ought not to be conducted as a course for would-be authors. When they complained the subject had become "too literary," then, they were condemning the tendency of some teachers, as one critic said, "to imitate the procedures and results of purely literary activity before there is a proper foundation for them" (Whitmore, 384). It was foundations of grammar and usage that students required. (Meyers 103)

The lessons here are obviously political ones; fundamentals precede art and art writing is for the elite (endlessly, the white, literate, at least middle-class kind),[5] and composition writing is for the masses who need to be educated and who need nothing more than <u>basic</u> literacy (although what <u>that</u> is no group has yet been able to agree upon).

There are conflicts here then of class and an issue of genres being asserted to represent class interests. But actual writers--student writers--don't adhere to these distinctions. I point to Fran, Lee and Frank, to the ways they found that one genre is not more valuable than another <u>for learning</u>; specifically, Frank writing a first story of eight pages is as exhilarated as is Fran writing a self-chosen term paper on parapsychology.

Early in his history of the subject, Meyers defines creative writing:

> As it is loosely applied today, creative writing seems to denote a class of compositions once simply called fiction....As such it is a makeshift, omnibus term for poems, novels, novellas, short stories, and (sometimes) plays; for the invented as opposed to the historical; for the imaginary in contradistinction to the actual; for the concrete and particular as distinguished from the thorny and abstract. In short, for non-non-fiction.....But there is a perfectly good name for such creations, whether they are poems or political tales. It is fiction. (2)

The textual creations Meyers catalogs as fixed genres will be found by many current compositionists (and literary theorists) as convenient, contingent and situated. The historical must be discovered through the ideologically based author; the actual can only be apprehended through the representations of language and constructed texts; and the thorny and abstract may provide valid but (currently) not sanctioned ways of learning about the concrete and particular.

Essentially, our categorical systems work to maintain order within our communities. And our communities--to maintain and preserve order--insist that we adhere to our categories and their hierarchies. When genres blur, it is necessary to remind ourselves that categories are <u>constructed</u> and that genres are <u>defined</u>: "<u>Genre</u>," Scholes reminds us, "refers to things regularly done and <u>style</u> to a regular <u>way</u> of doing things" (2).

English studies is not the only field that is considering these problems. Particularly relevant is the situation of ethnographers

who are entertaining critiques of one-hundred-fifty years of field-research, purporting to detail the "real" life of other cultures. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains:

> ...[the idea] that the writing of ethnography involves telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolisms, and deploying tropes is commonly resisted, often fiercely, because of a confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up. The strange idea that reality has an idiom in which it prefers to be described...leads on to the even stranger idea that, if literalism is lost, so is fact. (140)

It would seem that the strands of English studies--literature, composition, and creative writing--are also laboring under, in fact have even helped to establish and maintain, these strange ideas of the "true" relationship of fact and fiction: if literalism is lost, is fact? What of the imaginative reality of Fran's fabricated composition interview?

Whether we sanction it or not, when fact and fiction do blend, we need another way of looking at writing. Scholes assists:

> To put it as directly, and perhaps as brutally, as possible, we must stop "teaching literature" and start "studying texts." Our rebuilt apparatus must be devoted to textual studies, with the consumption and production of texts thoroughly intermingled. (16)

These thoughts take me back to the classroom. As a composition teacher, I find I have developed the unique ability to grade individual freshman essays. I can invoke the generic "college-level"

rubric (essentially thesis, logic, development, organization, etc.) that my teacher preparation class and textbooks taught me. And I rarely doubt my abilities to rank what might seem a bewildering array of "essays." I can identify not only superior and inferior examples of writing but every range in-between.

When I'm in the poetry writing class, however, in spite of my own experience with the genre--which includes far more practice with the form and far more reading in it--I'm sure that it is impossible to evaluate (grade) the single poem and I have never done so. Although I know a few individuals who grade single pieces of "art" writing, most do not. And never would I grade my student's first poem although early in my teaching I was regularly required to grade first freshman essays in freshman composition. And oddly, in creative writing classes, the adequate story or poem (call it average or C-level) is rarely discussed and never assumed to be a normal base for future growth.

Clearly, I am a product of my own literary education, valuing the "fictional" work (psuedo-literary text) over the essay (psuedo-non-literary text), for I do find it perfectly possible to talk about the average essay and impossible (not-field-sanctioned) to hold serious discussions about the average poem, despite my willingness to tell you that I believe writing in each genre to be more similar to writing in other genres than it is different from them.

I am of course influenced by what Linda Brodkey calls the "scene of writing." In the modern scene of writing, the artist is locked into a garret, writing masterpieces alone. Brodkey warns of the

danger of this image, "...those who teach as well as those who take composition [and all writing] courses are influenced by the scene of writing, namely, that all of us try to recreate a garret and all that it portends whether we are writing in a study, a library, a classroom, or at a kitchen table, simply because we learned this lesson in writing first" (397). One result of this lesson is an overvaluation of--a worship of--literature. Over and over, we come to non-non-fiction with "the attitude of the exegete before the sacred text" (Scholes 16).

Not surprisingly, the "scene of writing" and its image of "solitary genesis," as Valerie Miner calls it, affects our students' views of texts. Our students quickly learn that the most valuable texts are puzzles; they learn to solve puzzles in literature classes and they come to creative writing hoping to learn puzzle-construction, to escape to a garret and reappear hours later with a soon-to-be-acknowledged masterpiece. The role of author is seductive as you've seen from Frank's journal. And the roles apportioned here leave nothing to composition classes except the predictable drudgery of delivering unpuzzling texts to uncomplicated readers.

It is possible to point out that institutions have rigid and self-maintaining categorical systems--field coverage, composition or creative writing, fact or fiction, and so on. It is less easy to discover how these systems work within research agendas--say the ones of the composition community. Most composition research I encounter compares and contrasts the basic and the expert (non-fiction) writer. Difficult areas--student engagement (or lack of), individual talent, cognition and creativity, writer's affect--are generally

bounded out of research projects. There are few studies of creative writers and little encouragement to conduct such studies.[6] Apparently, researchers in composition studies have agreed to cover the terrain of non-fiction only. As we model the writing process, what will be known when we claim to know this thing we call the non-fiction writing process?

Creative writing as a composition research area, then, is generally ignored in spite of cross-the-line pedagogical raiding; compositionists have borrowed effective teaching methods from the creative writing workshop--particularly group response sessions and portfolio evaluation--improved on those borrowings and gone beyond them. But we still tend to deny the basic commonalities of writing a poem and writing an essay. That is many teachers in both writing areas have. Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen see things differently:

> Our basic assumption is that all the writers we teach in school are creative though the catalogue description "creative" is often used to distinguish three literary genres from the others. It follows that student writing is literature, that is, free and disinterested, a product of imagination and thought. In our experience and the experience of those we know, there is no essential difference between writing a poem and writing an essay, except, as we must often say, that writing a poem is easier, its conventions being so much clearer and more plentiful. (65)

This may seem hard to believe until we remember that teachers of composition rarely themselves write compositions. So, for many of them, perhaps, writing a poem would be easier than writing an essay since they are well schooled when literature majors in the

conventions of the form. They are also schooled in that school never to view student writing as literature (despite what that vision promises for the project of responding to students' essay drafts). Literature is what is past, what is old. Scholes points out that, "The prestige of literature is so great that we have a taboo against naming the one who creates it"(12); in its traditional guise, literature is always non-contemporary and produced by empowered "others." Ponsot and Deen, however, redefine literature through language, claiming "What[ever in a text] we pay attention to is literature" (68) and then show how this definition helps both teacher and student:

> When we name and praise the literature in a student's writing, she sees, sometimes for the first time, what she had done. Then she sees that what she has originated is not peculiar to her but is part of her culture. (68)

Ponsot and Deen's claim, that students can see the literature within their own writing in order to understand text, sits well with Scholes's view of teaching textuality--the way text influences text.

What is lost by these views? Certainly the idea that not everyone can be a writer, for everyone should be able to learn to see the texts within her texts. We also come closer to understanding student practices. This will be a relief, for then we don't have to be upset by Lee's successful non-non-fiction interview.

Imagine, as I have been doing lately, the vast network of freshman English teaching as we know it today. Consider that for years we may have been reading a wealth of "imaginative" and "creative" essays even when we assigned them and evaluated them as

non-fiction work. It is also possible then to visualize the infinity of shaped "family stories" and "true experiences" that comprise the beginning compositions of generations of creative writing students (and comprise the published texts of many of their teachers, myself included). These distinctions, I maintain, are given primacy because they help us keep our selves and our academic territories well and safely sorted.

These days, we might ask composition researchers to help us to take a postmodern look at genre distinctions and we might want to look at our own definitions of what is researchable. I think we must note, for instance, the way the essay is creeping back into the three-genre literature anthology and ask what it means when two recent books from a "composition" press focus on Literary Nonfiction and The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature. Claims are being raised formally that we can (and should) read non-fiction as non-non-fiction. To me, these claims suggest that some of the deepest categorical assumptions of our writing research model may be simplistically exclusionary; we have assumed, due to our own English studies institutional hierarchy, that comparing non-fiction to non-non-fiction is like comparing apples to oranges. Maybe. Maybe, though, we have we talked ourselves into using a single-lens, the wrong lens, one out of several possible category systems. What if non-fiction is apples and non-non-fiction is apples, too, and both must be looked at that way and/or categorized in other ways? A wealth of similar questions can be raised today on both sides of the line that is imagined to divide composition from creative writing; I tend to believe that our categories don't suffice and that new

questions are essential.

And our questions need to move into both territories from this disturbing spot in no-person's land where we reside today with Fran and Lee and Frank. For instance, there is much to be asked, too, about the world of creative writing instruction. Why is the history of creative writing the last to be written? In the creative writing class why do we devalue critical theory and writing research? In what ways does it hurt us to find out that the muse can have regular habits and hours and that our writing processes can be illuminated, adapted, enhanced and changed? What do we gain when we lose complete author-ity over our texts? And finally: Who is served by the assumption that the academy taints "creative" writers and that composition taints "creative" writers even worse than the generic "academy?"

It may be a sin, as Fran says, to ask these questions, but I don't think so.

Notes

1. The issue of rules and rule-breaking in writing classes is explored more fully in [Author's name] "Grammar B."
2. For more on the problems of undergraduate creative writing see [Author's name] "Teaching" and Released and Ostrom.
3. See Corder's "Asking for a Text."
4. For extensive composition-studies histories of the development of writing instruction in American universities, also consult Berlin.
5. See Eagleton and Graff.
6. Exceptions include those by Armstrong and Tomlinson.

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